Section One

Introductory Notes About Literacy in Libraries

Why would libraries be interested in literacy?

In a hardheaded practical sense, the future of libraries depends on literacy. Almost everything that lets a patron use and enjoy the library is dependent on literacy. When we try to help the people in our communities become fully literate, we are simply increasing the number of people who can use our libraries in the future. But it goes beyond that.

Nationally, society is concerned about English language literacy. While literacy levels among native speakers in the United States are not declining, society now requires a level of literacy for survival, self-sufficiency, and success that is much beyond what was necessary even a few decades ago. Society has "raised the bar" for literacy accomplishment, and an alarming number of Americans in the United States are not reaching the higher level.

Libraries increasingly talk about providing "access." We stretch ourselves to provide electronic access to the Internet and to ever more databases. We use interlibrary loan and document delivery to give our patrons access to materials not in the local collection. We form union catalogues to help our patrons access materials from other places. Since most of what we provide depends on print, literacy is the most essential access mechanism of all. To provide full access we may choose to support our patrons' literacy skills.

The idea of public libraries as a source of literacy programs, efforts, activities, and support is hardly new. Over a century ago the idea of planting a public library in each community was part of educational and social trends that started after the Civil War and grew stronger at the turn of the 20th century. The public library was seen as an extension of public education, an opportunity for self-education, and a service to educate people trying to rise to the American dream. The library field as a whole is expressing new interest in literacy. The American Library Association has identified literacy as a key area for the 21st century. There was library participation at the National Literacy Summit of 2000.

For Missouri's children, public, private, and home schools provide direct literacy instruction, but resources and situations differ from place to place. In some parts of Missouri there are active direct-instruction adult literacy efforts through public schools, state-funded adult education classes, community colleges, and local literacy councils. In other parts of the state there are large gaps in adult literacy services. Missouri is not a state in which literacy funding flows through libraries. Libraries in Missouri that offer focused literacy services are generally doing that out of a sense of mission or local commitment. Literacy situations are different from community to community.

Perhaps there is not a single universal answer how libraries in Missouri should involve themselves in literacy work. Where other services are good, duplications may be unnecessary and the library may choose an active literacy support role. Where other services don't exist, libraries may be the best agency to provide them. Nothing forbids direct instruction from a library. The connection between reading and libraries is immutable.

There is more to literacy work than direct instruction. There are multiple factors involved in the literacy level of a community and in raising literacy levels. The diagram below conceptualizes one way to look at the interaction of literacy factors.

A Place for Libraries as Literacy Agencies

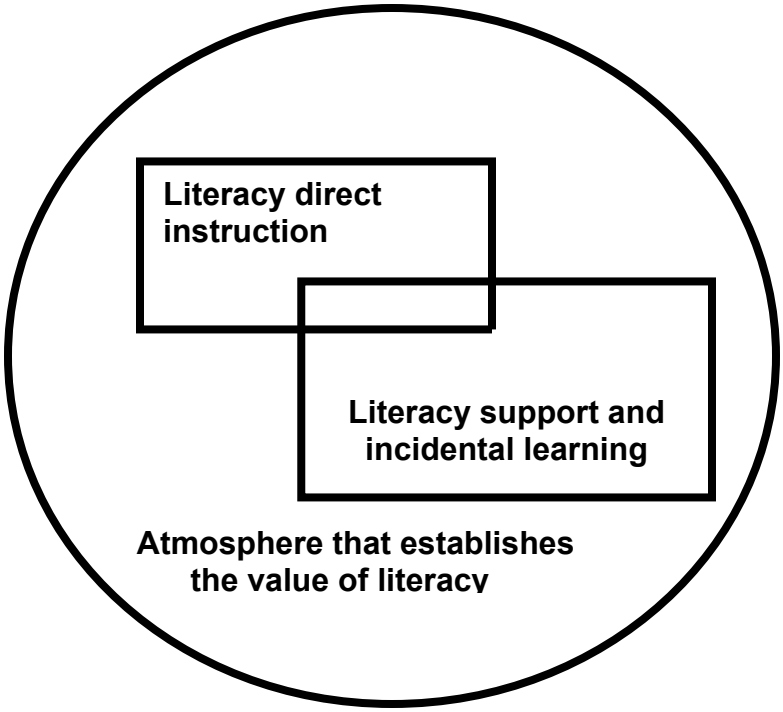

Diagram from Karen R. Jones, Missouri State Library
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While only a few libraries in Missouri may find it possible or appropriate to offer direct literacy instruction, all of Missouri's public libraries are in a natural position to offer literacy support and affect a culture that supports literacy. This contribution should not be overlooked or devalued. Research increasingly indicates that instructional methods alone may not produce full literacy and that support and daily experience with literacy are vital factors in achievement.

Literacy instruction and literacy support overlap and interact. The importance of what children already know about reading when they enter school is now recognized as a vital factor in reading achievement. A few children learn to read without formal instruction, and they are almost always children who have had a great deal of literacy exposure and support. Unhappily, and more commonly, some children reach formal literacy instruction without good literacy support, and for them regular instruction is often inadequate. Children without early exposure to books are already at a disadvantage when they enter kindergarten. Books hold new vocabulary, offer background knowledge, increase language development, and introduce the basic concepts of print and text. When adults read books to children they are increasing the children's knowledge of all those things. They are also building a warm bond and good feelings about reading that

later become motivation to help children persevere until they do learn to read well on their own. Children's author and literacy consultant Mem Fox asserts that children need to have heard at least 1,000 stories by the time they enter school. By providing a rich variety of books and other story materials, and by encouraging parents to read to their children, libraries may play a larger role than we had previously thought in children's acquisition of literacy skills. Literacy support in the early years is not optional enrichment, but direct preparation for literacy and literacy instruction.

Once reading instruction begins, children need books and texts in order to practice what they are learning and become more fluent readers. In reading circles it is now axiomatic that once children have some grasp of the reading process, they become better readers by simply reading. With reading, as with so many other things, practice builds skill. Time spent reading improves reading achievement. This principle holds through adolescence and even into adulthood. So, through children's collections, summer reading programs, family activities, and programming for all ages, libraries move our patrons toward literacy simply by giving them access to print materials and encouraging them to spend time reading and improve reading skill in the process.

Finally, activities that support both literacy and formal instruction occur in an atmosphere that either values or devalues literacy. This can be crucial since motivation and the amount of literate activity that surrounds young people are now recognized as basic factors in whether they achieve literacy. Our society decries our literacy problem, but in many ways the same society does not encourage the acquisition of literacy. Social pressures and media messages that devalue literacy and disdain school achievement hamper the literacy achievement of too many children, especially minority and at-risk children. Yet, after allowing and even sending the messages that reading is not really important, society demands that young people have good literacy skills to succeed as adults. Not becoming fully literate puts many children at a severe disadvantage for life. The mixed messages are not helping us attain literacy as a nation. By inviting children early into the world of stories, information, books, and learning, libraries counter this trend. Children's programs draw school children into reading in ways that are fun and pleasant and send the message that books are treasures and reading is good. Teen Summer Reading adds "cool" to reading and learning, and our young adult collections widen the world for our teen patrons as well as improving their literacy. Adult programming meets a variety of needs through the vehicle of offering people things to read. By offering programming and recreational reading as well as information, libraries keep literate pursuits alive and observable and valuable in our communities.

In the same ways libraries help counter ***aliteracy***, the condition of being able to read but not reading which leaves many people no better off in terms of their worldview than their low literate counterparts. By building interest in reading, by reminding the adults to support reading, and by cooperating with the community in providing options for adults who are not yet literate, libraries change the climate in favor of literacy. This is not a small thing to do for our fellow human beings.

In one sense, if the library is open and functioning it is in the literacy business. The body of current research indicates that simple exposure and access to attractive, interesting, and quality printed objects is a strong factor in literacy achievement. Library collections are a literacy effort

by their very nature. Libraries can address literacy in many ways through the process of simply being a library. Although state appropriations, funding streams, and other situations probably mean that direct instruction will not be the norm in Missouri's public libraries, libraries can increase the literacy focus and effects of their ongoing activities. We can shape what we already do to focus our services more directly on literacy attainment and enhancement.

Some educators make a distinction between incidental and intentional learning. Incidental learning is what happens from observations and experience without direct instruction. Intentional learning happens when a person deliberately sets out to learn something. Perhaps there is a useful analogy in library literacy efforts. Libraries are perfectly set up to facilitate incidental learning and we provide much incidental literacy support. Many libraries are trying to add intentional literacy support efforts and focused literacy improvement opportunities. This manual is born of the desire to focus and sharpen what we have done incidentally for years and make literacy services in libraries more intentional.

Libraries alone cannot change the literacy level of a community or the nation, but they can help tilt the balance toward literacy for some individuals, support literacy development in all patrons, especially young ones, nurture literacy in their communities, encourage those who are literate to benefit from that skill. Libraries can be an active force for literacy and all the benefits literacy brings with it.

A statement from ALA

21st Century Literacy is one of five key action areas adopted by the American Library Association to fulfill its mission of providing the highest quality library and information services for all people. Helping children and adults develop skills they need to fully participate in an information society—whether it's learning to read or explore the Internet—is central to that mission.

2001 Survey of Literacy Activities in Missouri Libraries

Although many library programs and almost all library services have some connections to literacy, the 2001 library literacy survey sought to identify and collect information about library efforts and activities that represent **intentional literacy programs**, that is, **efforts for which improving the English literacy of participants is the primary goal**.

We defined literacy first as enough skill with written English that a person can use reading and writing to gain knowledge and access information and human experience, both in the workplace and the community. We also noted that literacy indicates sufficient skill with the written system of English to function well in a literate English-speaking society, to use literacy as a tool to achieve goals and develop knowledge and potential. For a literate person, printed English is not an impediment. (Literacy is not an English-only phenomenon, but English is the common language of Missouri, so the survey dealt only with English language literacy.)

Ninety-eight library buildings responded to the survey. Some were branches and some were municipal or county libraries without branches. These 98 comprise a little over a fourth of the approximately 380 public library buildings in Missouri at that time and represented about a third of the public library systems in the state. We asked branches to respond individually because we realized that often services within a system vary from branch to branch depending on the neighborhood or community the branch is serving. Thus we felt that surveying by building rather than system would give a truer picture of the scope of literacy services.

The survey first asked about use of the building:

- 94% of the libraries responding indicated literacy related groups sometimes use their facilities.
- 58% of them said the library is a site for tutoring of some type.
- 10% have meeting space used by groups.
- 6% of the libraries responding house AEL classes. (AEL is the adult education program offered and funded through the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Allowing a class to use library space can be a major contribution.)

We next asked about library staff time directed toward literacy or literacy support activities:

- 72% of the libraries responding make referrals to literacy programs and resources in their locales.
- 27% of the libraries have staff members who lend their expertise by doing presentations.
- 15% of the libraries responding have staff members who do some consulting.
- 27% of libraries responding said staffs are involved in program planning.
- 56% are directly involved in collaborations.

Materials, the time-honored standby of libraries, were the next category surveyed:

- 86% of the libraries responding to the survey report having materials at low reading levels suitable for some part of their patron community.

- 46% of the libraries responding to the survey reported having specific new reader collections for adults.
- Only a few reported having instructional materials for adults, but about half reported having materials that would complement or enhance a literacy curriculum.
- 86% of the library buildings responding have books on tape or CD and audio materials that would be useful to low level readers.

The section of the survey asking for brief descriptions of literacy activities indicated that activities to help children develop adequate reading skills were the dominant literacy programming of the libraries responding. The best-case literacy scenario is, of course, for children to leave elementary school with grade level reading skills, thus reducing or eliminating the need for adult literacy programs. This goal seems to be a natural fit with library programming, and some respondents used the comments section to point out the wealth of available materials even small libraries provide to help with literacy development in children.

In answer to the question, "What would help you increase your literacy efforts?" the most frequent response was "staff," closely followed by "money." The need for money to hire staff or free up staff time is evident, so in practice funding is indicated as the top need. Other respondents noted the need for training and for books and other materials, needs that are also related to funding in most cases. Information was another stated need, and is one the State Library has increased its efforts to address. Some respondents noted that their facilities were not adequate for or conducive to literacy activities. Some also responded that their "plates were full" and literacy services were not likely to be added without a drastic change in the situation. A few also noted that no requests or expressed needs for literacy services had been received in their libraries, so there would seem to be no need to expand a service not being requested by their user communities.

The "additional comments" section of the survey highlighted several issues that impact all library literacy efforts to some extent. Several library buildings pointed out that they had once had larger literacy programs, but as other community entities picked up similar literacy services the library shifted more to a support role. Others pointed out that in their community's local literacy providers were not open to collaboration, and that neither competition nor duplication seemed helpful. The high loss of GED books and specific literacy materials was mentioned along with the general unattractiveness and low circulation rates of new reader adult collections. The fact that low-literate adults often do not continue in tutoring after an agency went to considerable trouble to set up instruction was mentioned. Many comments emphasized the issues mentioned previously of too few staff and the lack of a dependable funding stream. The need to expand services for non-English-proficient community members was mentioned. Services for home school families were also mentioned as a literacy connection for children and young people.

While we must be careful not to overgeneralize from responses given by about a fourth of the library buildings in Missouri, a general picture does emerge from this 2001 survey, and it is consistent with anecdotal reports and previous survey results gathered by the Missouri State Library. When libraries have adequate space for group meetings they seem generous in sharing it. Library literacy efforts seem to vary from community to community, depending on other

local efforts and resources. (Since libraries in Missouri have much local control, this is a pattern we might expect to continue.) The dominant form of literacy programming in libraries seems to be support for developing literacy in children and young people. In a few places, however, libraries play major roles in supporting and sustaining literacy services for adults, and others have played this role historically by supporting literacy efforts that later became self sustaining. The lack of a steady funding stream for alternative literacy efforts and literacy support, a situation often noted by local literacy councils and volunteer literacy groups as well, also affects libraries negatively.

Advantages of a LIBRARY-BASED Literacy Program

- That's where the books are!
- That's where people who are crusaders for reading are!
- The public library is a safe haven – non-threatening to parents and to children – providing a positive setting without an institutional stigma attached.
- Librarians love books and reading and avidly promote and model the joy of reading to others.
- Other wonderful materials are found at the library; families who go there can access these, such as computers, videos, books on tape, large print books, and dictionaries.
- The public library is THE "life-long learning institution" which will never graduate or promote you out of its services; you can always use the library no matter how old or how young you are, how educated or uneducated.
- Libraries are community centers where individuals with all levels of education come for information.
- Libraries provide for the developmental literacy needs of children and of adults.
- Children who discover the world of reading at the library will continue to access it for the rest of their lives.
- Public libraries are FREE and in nearly every community!
- Many public libraries are open nights and weekends (even Sundays) so they are accessible to working parents.
- Most public libraries provide entertaining, informative, and fun programs for children as well as for the entire family.
- Children and adults can correlate their books with each other by subject or genre, thus encouraging family discussions and experiences.
- Public libraries are non-discriminatory. They have "something for everyone!"

Reprinted with permission from Dr. Carole Talan, long-time library literacy specialist, California State Library. January 2003

Founding and Funding Literacy Programs (Neal-Schuman, 1999.)

FIVE LITERACY PRINCIPLES FOR LIBRARIES

1. Early exposure to literacy objects and literacy activities is very important for later achievement in literacy and in school.

2. Reading is a language function. Anything that helps build vocabulary helps build literacy. Anything that helps children use language in a variety of ways or develops the ability to tell a story and participate in a conversation helps build literacy.

3. Background knowledge is necessary to make meaning from text; it can come from books, stories, and book-related activities as well as direct experience.

4. Once a person has some reading ability, time spent reading builds literacy skill. Recreational reading builds literacy at any age.

5. Motivation matters. Pleasant experiences with reading increase the time a learner spends reading and the effort a learner is willing to expend on reading. Therefore good experiences with books help build literacy.

Guiding library collections with literacy in mind:

- The motivation of attractive and interesting material a literacy learner can read encourages reading and builds reading fluency.
- For readers at all levels, time spent reading increases reading skill and attractive usable materials are linked to time spent reading.
- Materials of high interest and low reading level must often be chosen purposefully and individually. Audio books and other recordings have value in building literacy.
- New Readers or those struggling with literacy must be able to find usable material easily.

Guiding library activities with literacy in mind:

- Programming may not require literacy skill, but it can make literacy attractive.Programming can motivate reading; interest in reading increases time spent reading, which in turn builds literacy skill. Programming connects reading and life.
- Programming can build background skill for literacy or background knowledge for reading comprehension.
- Word games, rhymes, and songs help children grasp the sounds of language, an understanding they need later to use phonics.
- Talking about something that has been read builds the reader's ability to make meaning from text.
- Activities involving rereading, retelling, or writing build reading skill. Choral reading, dramatic reading, readers theater, puppetry, or staged interviews with the characters in a story all help reading skill. Activities such as predicting, summarizing, comparing, reacting, discussing alternate endings, or seeking background knowledge on a topic build comprehension.
- Anything that encourages anybody to read builds literacy.

Literacy Numbers for Missouri Public School Students
2003 MAP scores for reading

These are statewide averages; urban figures show less achievement.
Proficient or advanced (above grade level)

32.7% 3rd graders,
30.6 % 7th graders,
21.4% 11th graders.

Nearing proficiency (about grade level)

39.5% 3rd graders,
31.3 % 7th graders,
42.8% 11th graders.

Step 1 and progressing (below grade level)

26.4% 3rd graders,
36.3 % 7th graders,
35.4% 11th graders.

Missouri graduation rate 2003: 83.9%

Missouri yearly dropout rate 2003: 3.68%

Missouri non-graduation rate 2003: 16.1%

MAP test scores and other data for individual school districts are found at http://dese.mo.gov/schooldata/.

Use the column on the right to "Make a Selection" and choose the district. Scroll down to, and highlight the name of the district from the box "Alphabetical List of School Districts." (You may also search a separate box for charter schools.) Click the "load profile" gray box.

Each district page will be divided into categories for information. MAP scores are in the Educational Performance Data. You may have to scroll down to reach that section. Click on the name of the MAP section you want to view. (Reading is part of Communication Arts.) Other statistics for that school district (graduation rates annual dropout rates, accreditation, etc.) are also on that page.

Literacy Statistics in Missouri in 2004

Literacy statistics are not hard data or precise numbers, but if we look at enough of them they show us a fairly consistent picture for Missouri. The numbers indicate that about 18% of adult Missourians have a problematic literacy level.

The National Adult Literacy Survey of 1992 (NALS) found 17% of Missourians in the lowest levels of literacy achievement. (This figure included non-native speakers of English.) The next National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL 2003) is in process; Missouri is in the sample.

Census 2000 reports that 18.7% of the adults over 25 in Missouri, 679,095 people, lack a high school diploma. In 2003, 7,186 Missourians earned a GED.
The overall non-graduation rate in Missouri's public schools was 15%-19% in the last five years, 15.8% in 2003, higher in some areas. It has been falling for several years, which means the graduation rate is rising. The yearly dropout rate in Missouri's public schools was 3.68% in 2003; it is higher in urban areas.
2003 MAP scores showed 26.4% of public school 11th graders were well below grade level (Step 1 or Progressing), which suggests they are low literate.
In the United States, absolute illiteracy in native-born, non-disabled adults is infrequent. Low literacy (insufficient literacy for the demands of life and economic survival) is the way literacy professionals describe the problem, and it is a current issue.

Overall literacy levels in the USA are steady, at least among non-disabled native speakers. The literacy demands of daily survival are rising so quickly that people are failing to meet them; this has harsher consequences than it once did.

In FY-01, 49% of Missourians receiving public assistance lacked a high school diploma or GED.

In 2002, 54% of incarcerated offenders in Missouri lacked a high school diploma or its equivalent.

2.7% of Missouri's population in 2000 was foreign born (an 80.8% increase over 1990) and about half of them reported speaking English less than well. It is not entirely clear from numbers how many low-literate adults are immigrants and how many of them were born in the USA. Non-native speakers continue to arrive.

The way averages are figured means that statewide averages may not be representative of a given community or population.

Literacy statistics alone tell us little about the cause of low literacy for any individual or group.